

November 5, 2006
 Mendenhall Presbyterian Church
 Mark 12:28-34

LOVE IN 3-D

The young woman who cuts my hair is blind in one eye. That means that she has trouble judging distances and seeing things in three dimensions; that is, in their full shape and depth and volume. Seeing things in three dimensions is an ability that we luckier ones have because we have two eyes, properly arranged and focused. It's called "binocular vision."

There is also a mind's eye, an internal vision, an ability to appreciate beauty, to search for truth, separate right from wrong, admit error and accept responsibility, to love. These insights also need a binocular vision, -- a way of seeing truth in all its dimensions and from more than one viewpoint. This is the sense and sensibility that Jesus was always trying to cultivate in those around him and it was never easy. This larger view is something that none of us has fully developed. We all have our blind spots. We all have our one-dimensional opinions. We all have our distorted relationships. Opening eyes and minds and hearts was Jesus' life-long commitment and it is still his work in and among us.

A scribe asked Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment in the law?" It wasn't really a trap, although some have tried to make it that. That man had heard Jesus speak. He had assessed the quality of Jesus' thought, and he earnestly wanted to see what Jesus would say about one of the very key issues in Jewish religious life and culture. Generations of scribes and lawyers and rabbis had expanded the Ten Commandments into a huge and complicated maze of laws and customs with no real final and final authority about what law applied in what circumstance. It was always open to argument.

The question really went to the very roots of Jewish faith, of Jewish worship, and of Jewish moral and ethical behavior. So the scribe, the seeker, put the issue to that One who seemed to have the broader, clearer vision. "What is the first commandment in the Law?"

Jesus' answer, like the question itself, came right out of the heart of the Jewish faith and its religious tradition. He recited the great verse from Deuteronomy, the verse that, for the religious Jew, is still, the call to worship and to prayer -- and that is still the basic creed of God's people everywhere: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

Then Jesus went the second step and added one more law, the one other precept that makes the love of God, and God's love for his people, the force that transforms the quality of life for every human being: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. It wasn't original with Jesus, even though it captures the spirit of his own life and teaching. It's a verse tacked on to another sentence in the book of Leviticus (19:18). Leviticus is a book filled with laws and rules that affected the most intimate details of Jewish life -- the very thing that Jesus was trying to lift his people above. And yet, out of that strange Old Testament book Jesus mined this gem of religious insight and elevated it to a equality with the most powerful expression of the faith he proclaimed. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

There you have it: Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Love in three dimensions! And none of them can stand alone. None, by itself, has the power to transform life. None, by itself, has the power to save. Together they weave the seamless fabric of a full life, the life that is both happy and holy, the life that blesses others and in blessing others, blesses ourselves, the life that Jesus lived and wants us to live.

It's the "as yourself" part that often gets lost in the equation or gets taken for granted, but loving oneself is as important as loving God or loving the people around you. Some people find loving themselves, respecting themselves, hard to do, and the result is cramped relationships and bitterness of spirit. The key to loving ourselves as well as others is to ask how we could despise what God loves.

Love. God's love for us, God's love for his creation, love so great that he gave his only son for the healing of a broken world -- that kind of love goes infinitely beyond our sentimental understanding of the word. Certainly, God's love embraces us as we are. That is God's grace and forgiveness. But we can not stop there.

There is a tendency among many modern Christians to think of loving one's neighbor as a religious version of "I'm OK. You're OK. and let's leave it at that." Such an anemic version of God's love simply sanctifies our notions of ordinary human decency and interprets that as Christian love. It is a love with no demands or sacrifices asked -- a love that does not attempt to transform. It only confirms and conforms to whatever is our notion of tolerance and civility.

Tolerance, civility and decency are certainly not, in themselves, bad. They are in short enough supply in our communities these days. But they are not enough. God's love for us is a love that seeks to transform, to transform us into new beings. "Transformation" is the new expression in the church that has come to replace the old word "conversion." Conversion carries all of the baggage of tent-meeting evangelism and emotion; but it means the same thing.

Transformation is a life-long effort, no matter where we are in our pilgrimage. And we can't even explain it fully. Even our ridiculously fallible language becomes a lesson in how God's grace works in spite of, and even through, our human frailty. There will always be room for struggle, growth and change.

The nameless Jewish scribe asked Jesus a vitally important question. He got a life-transforming answer and a new and clearer vision . When the beginning of his own transformation appeared, he got a blessing -- a blessing from Jesus that sounded a lot like one of those Minnesota understatements: It's not half bad. It could be worse. Jesus said "You are not so far from the kingdom of God." And so it shall be with us.

We love God, we praise God, not to celebrate our own faith but to give thanks for the faith God has in us. That is our communion. That is our thanksgiving, that is our Eucharist -- To let ourselves look at God, to let us look at our neighbor, and let God look at us all. Our joy is boundless and our peace passes all understanding.